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AUTHOR Hachten, William A.
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ABSTRACT

The role of the black journalist in South Africa is contradictory, precarious, and permeated with politics. There is little freedom of expression for blacks in South Africa, yet white-owned newspapers have expanded their coverage of black news, and some have special editions for black readers. As a result, the English language press is using more black reporters and is often quite dependent on them since they can sometimes go into areas where white reporters are not welcome. A hazard for black journalists is the constant threat of being arbitrarily harassed, beaten, or jailed without charge by police. Other complaints of black journalists are that blacks are employed at lower salaries or as stringers on a modest retainer without employee benefits. A separatist movement is growing that pits black journalists against their white liberal friends. The Writers Association of South Africa, an organization of black journalists, has assumed a separatist stance and asks for equal pay and full recognition for black journalists, more and better training for blacks, more voice in editorial policy, and black editors of township editions. (MKM)

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THE BLACK JOURNALIST IN SOUTH AFRICA

By

William A. Hachten
Professor

School of Journalism and Mass Communication
University of Wisconsin-Madison

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Within tense, deeply divided South Africa, where many say a civil war has already begun, the black journalist plays a curious and perhaps pivotal role. That role, like much else in that troubled land, is contradictory, precarious and permeated with politics.

On the one hand, the black journalist appears to be ineffectual and powerless. He lives with his fellow 19 million blacks in an authoritarian police state and has no protections against its abuses. Because of his skin color, he is subject to all the indignities and inequities of the hated apartheid system.

As a reporter or a photographer covering a story, he is often singled out by police for beatings, harassment or detention (arbitrary jailing without trial for many months), all hazards rarely faced by his white colleagues who live in a different more affluent world, still enjoying some limited civil rights and protection of law.

Further, a black press as such hardly exists in South Africa today. Almost all the estimated 200 to 225 black journalists now active in South African journalism work on newspapers owned and controlled by white publishing organizations. There are no general newspapers owned and controlled by Blacks, Coloreds or Asians, and none that express political concerns of the non-white majority.[1]

South Africa has a deserved reputation of having the freest press in Africa, but this is a freedom only enjoyed by the 4.4 million whites and their 23 daily newspapers and 550 periodicals.[2] For if freedom of the press means, at the minimum, "the right to talk politics," then there is almost no free expression for blacks in South Africa. In fact, there is considerably less today than there was 30 years ago.

But despite all this, the black journalist IS important in South African journalism and is becoming more so all the time. Black literates are now more numerous than whites and are an increasingly significant factor in newspaper readership. Blacks now outnumber white readers of some of the English-language newspapers, and the trend is clearly toward an ever-expanding black readership. Urban blacks are buying more of the consumer products advertised in newspapers, and half the customers in Johannesburg's retail stores are non-whites.

Newspapers have expanded their coverage of black news, and some have special editions for black readers. As a result, the English-language press is using more black reporters and often is quite dependent on them. This was dramatically shown during the rioting in sprawling Soweto in June 1976 when white reporters were sealed off from reporting that seething black ghetto both by police and by black suspicion.

"Suddenly, it was black journalists who were bringing out the details for the white press from places where they lived and the people they lived among."[3] Benjamin Pogrund, deputy editor of the Rand Daily Mail, says, "Without the courage and determination of the black journalists, the world would never have learned what really happened in the Soweto riots."[4] "The black journalist found himself in a new role," says Percy Qoboza, editor of Post, "Their sheer guts and professionalism during those days gave notice that the black journalist had matured and is now arrived."[5]

Yet despite this newfound recognition and status, black journalists often feel alienated, frustrated and angry. Many consider themselves professionally thwarted, underpaid and relegated to second class status

on white newspapers. Further, many of them reflect the angry, nihilistic extremism spawned in the Soweto riots and now so pervasive among young urban blacks. Many consider themselves part of "the struggle" to rid South Africa of white rule and insist journalistic objectivity is impossible: "there is only our side and their side." Increasingly, militant black reporters are rejecting moderation of any sort, even cooperation and association with sympathetic white colleagues. This black separatism is estranging them from liberal white journalists and is directly related to the black consciousness movement of Steve Biko.

High Hazard Journalism

This new militancy of the black journalist has come with the radical shift in black politics triggered by the 1976-77 riots in Soweto and elsewhere. Being a black journalist in South Africa has long been difficult, but it must currently be some of the most hazardous duty for any newsmen in the "free world." He must work with the constant fear that he may be arbitrarily harassed, beaten or jailed without charge by police. One reporter told me, "The situation is getting worse since the 1976 riots. Police will beat up reporters on the slightest provocation for what they consider obstruction of justice. So black reporters are finding it harder to do their job and remain objective."[6]

As 1977 began, a dozen black journalists who had covered the June 1976 riots were still being detained without trial or charge. Three picked up in September, Jan Tugwana and Willie Nkosi of Rand Daily Mail and Duma Nklovu of the World had been heavily involved in reporting

events. Earlier, two other Mail journalists, Peter Magubane and Nat Serache, as well as Joe Thloloe of Drum were detained. As a Mail colleague reported, "The six detainees shared a number of common traits. All were black, all were members of English-language publications, which in varying degrees are critical of apartheid, and all were responsible, directly or indirectly, for reports which put the police in a bad light."[7]

Most of these journalists were arrested under the Terrorism Act and most eventually were released without trial. Enoch Duma of the Sunday Times was one tried under the Terrorism Act, but found not guilty after he convinced a court that his contacts with black resistance groups in Soweto and elsewhere had been part of his work, not an attempt to subvert the government. So it has been in recent years, a continuing stream of non-white journalists (for some have been Coloreds or Asians) in and out of police custody.

The hazards of being a black newsman are well illustrated by the career of the distinguished photojournalist, Peter Magubane, who began in the 1950's as a Drum photographer and for the last 20 years has been a staff photographer for the Rand Daily Mail. Five of those years, he was a banned person: he could not go into a building with a printing press and could not talk with more than two persons at a time. Confined to his home township, he could not practice journalism and had to report regularly to police. In addition, he was imprisoned for a total of two years, spending six months in ordinary confinement and 586 days in solitary confinement (a record for a journalist). Yet Magubane has never been convicted of any crime.

While working, Magubane has felt the muzzle of a policeman's machine gun against his temple, been struck in the face with a gun butt and his film and camera taken. But Magubane says his experiences are not unique. Others he said could tell tales more shocking. "At least, I've been fortunate that I have been able to go ahead in life with my profession. I am no martyr. I am no hero. I am a photojournalist."[8]

The toughest crackdown on the press in South African history came later in the year, on October 19, 1977, following the suspicious death of Biko while in police custody. The World's editor, Percy Qoboza, and Weekend World news editor, Aggrey Klaaste, were arrested and their papers closed "for contributing to a subversive situation." Donald Woods, editor of the East London Daily Dispatch and a personal friend of Biko, was pulled off a plane bound for the United States and banned for five years under the Suppression of Communism Act. These draconian measures were significant in several ways. World and Weekend World were not typical of the many small non-white publications that have been systematically suppressed over the years. Although edited for blacks and largely black staffed, the highly successful papers were owned and managed by the powerful Argus Company, biggest and most successful newspaper group in the country. As for Woods, although more liberal than most, he was a well-regarded establishment-type white English-language editor and the banning of such a newspaperman was unprecedented.[9]

At the same time, the 150-member Union of Black Journalists was banned. Twenty-six black journalists were later fined for taking part in a protest march against this action. The government perceived the

UBJ as part of Biko's broadly based black consciousness movement and as such it was considered subversive. It was no coincidence that two of the reporters detained after Soweto were Joe Thloloe and the Star's Harry Mashabela, current and past presidents of UBJ.

The actions against Qoboza and Woods were also directly related to Biko's movement and the national furor that followed his death. As one observer in South Africa told me: "In the World, Qoboza had recorded and sympathized with black consciousness views but did not advocate them. Woods, in the Dispatch, merely recorded black consciousness views."[10] In any case, Justice Minister James Kruger was unwilling to permit black political views to be expressed in the press even to this limited extent.

Surrogates for a Black Press

This has not always been so; as far back as the late 19th century, black or African political views were found in South African newspapers. African political journalism dates from at least 1884 when John Tengo Jabavu started his newspaper, Imvo Zabantsundu in English and Xhosa to urge political and educational advances for blacks. Imvo continues today as a Xhosa weekly but it is a hollow shell of the political voice it once was.[11] For throughout recent times, especially since 1948 when the Afrikaner-dominated National Party took power, the black press, which had flowered earlier in this century, has been systematically pruned and cut down by official repression. Decline of black press freedom has paralleled the erosion of blacks' political rights.

Today there is practically no black press as such--no general newspapers controlled by blacks and which voice their own political

concerns. Instead, surrogate newspapers, owned by whites, are edited to attract black readers. A major change in South African journalism in recent years, especially for the 15 dailies and three Sunday papers in English, has been the marked increase among non-white readers. And the papers' content reflect it: you see more black faces and news about blacks than five or ten years ago and a good deal more than one would find in U.S. metropolitan newspapers.

According to a study by Professor Tony Giffard of Rhodes University, some 33% of daily readers in 1962 were Black, Colored, or Asian. In 1977, the figure was 45%.[12] Since 1962, claimed readership of dailies has risen for whites by 30%, for coloreds by 125%, for Asians by 80%, and by blacks by almost 250%. English-language papers in particular are attracting large numbers of non-white readers who now outnumber white readers two to one in some cases. In Cape Town, more coloreds than whites read the English papers; in Durban, Indian readers almost equal white ones. In Johannesburg, more blacks read The Star, Rand Daily Mail, and the Citizen, taken together, than whites. Including the hugh black readership of the daily Post, blacks now outnumber white readers of Johannesburg's four English-language dailies by two to one.

The eight Afrikaans-language dailies have an almost exclusively white readership, with the exception of Die Burger, in Cape Town, which has 127,000 colored readers and 204,000 whites. The Afrikaans papers have little opportunity to expand into this growing non-white readership because they all support the ruling Nationalist Party and further, because the Afrikaans language is identified with apartheid. As a result, they use only a scattering of non-white journalists.

English-language papers have responded to this increasing black readership in two diverse ways: generalization and specialization. The Argus Company, with seven afternoon dailies and the largest aggregate circulation, specializes. It produces separate publications for various ethnic groups--weekly publications like Illanga for Zulus, the Cape Herald for Coloreds and Post (Natal) for Indians. It owns the only daily aimed solely at the Johannesburg blacks, the Post, which replaced the banned World and is published in the same plant with nearly the same staff.

Other newspapers, notably the Rand Daily Mail and the East London Daily Dispatch, generalize and aim at an integrated readership. "We see ourselves as a most important bridge, the last means of interracial communication," says Allister Sparks, Mail editor, whose paper's policies are moving it toward becoming a multi-racial newspaper from top to bottom. (It is one paper that doesn't use racial identifications in news stories.) The Daily Dispatch, says Editor George Farr, who succeeded Woods, is "very conscious of the needs of black readers. Our emphasis is on all the news in the area."[13] The Mail now has twice as many black readers as white; the Dispatch has four times as many.

With both black population and literacy increasing at much faster rates than those of whites, Giffard says that the single most significant trend for the future will be an ever-increasing black readership--but probably within the context of white-owned newspapers oriented toward the white middle class. For whenever even a white-owned paper like the World becomes a bit political, it faces a government crack down.

These surrogates for a black press obviously need black journalists to report the news of their communities. In fact, one measure of a surrogate black paper is the number of non-white journalists it employs and the most blacks are found on Post, Rand Daily Mail, Star, Drum magazine, Cape Herald and Voice, a church-sponsored weekly.

The Post, with a black reporting staff of about 30, has the largest concentration of black journalists, but a half dozen or more white subeditors do a lot of rewriting and put the paper together. The Mail, which competes with the Post for the black readership, has eight full time staffers and about a dozen or more black stringers. Each day the Mail puts out a Special Edition in which four or five pages of the regular edition, including page one, are made over and filled with news specifically for blacks. The afternoon Star with nine blacks and a number of stringers has a similar special edition for the black townships. But unlike the Mail, the Star is not particularly trying to attract black readers; it would prefer they read the other Argus paper, Post.

The Mail, on the other hand, has been losing money and is trying to attract non-white readers to make up for its dwindling white readership. The Mail, perhaps the most outspoken, courageous foe of apartheid of any newspaper in the world, has been a victim of the "kill the messenger" syndrome. By doing a better job of telling the bad news of South Africa's heightening tensions and likely racial confrontation, it has lost many of its white readers to the moderate Star. The Star, in turn, has lost readers to a new daily, The Citizen, which voices a strong right wing and pro-Nationalist position and was secretly subsidized by the South African government. The Citizen has one black staff member.

Other dailies around the country use varying numbers of non-white staffers. The Daily Dispatch puts out a weekly supplement, Indaba, in English and Xhosa for blacks of the Eastern Cape. Indaba is also distributed by the East Province Herald in Port Elizabeth.

Most of the other newspapers using black journalists are non-dailies. The Voice, a weekly sponsored by the South African Council of Churches, has an able black editor, Revelation Ntouli and 13 black staffers. A muted voice for the black consciousness movement, Voice has run into trouble with the Censorship Board and had several issues banned in mid-1978. Another religious paper of importance is Umafrika, a Roman Catholic paper published since 1919. But of a number of the various publications aimed at blacks, such as Drum, Love, a magazine for African women, and others devoted to sports, hobbies, or photo-comics, only Post and Voice make any effort to appeal to black political concerns albeit in a necessarily low-keyed way.

Conditions and Complaints

Frustration over political censorship is only one of the black journalists' complaints. Blacks, Coloreds and Asians have long been involved in South African journalism but most often as "leg men," the gatherers of facts who turn over their notes to white reporters or subeditors. Many and perhaps a majority of blacks work as stringers on a modest retainer supplemented by payment for what gets into the paper. Salaries for full-time black staffers, even on the most liberal papers, lag well behind. A full-time black reporter with ten years of experience will receive about R 400 a month (1 Rand = $1.15) compared with R 600 for a comparable white reporter. An experienced stringer will make about R 300 a month.

Blacks resent the indefinite status of being a stringer; they are ineligible for fringe benefits including insurance and are more vulnerable when dealing with police. If hurt, injured, beaten up or detained by police or hospitalized (all very real hazards for a black stringer) they are unlikely to receive insurance benefits. The Rand Daily Mail has decided to eliminate the use of stringers and increase its number of full-time black staffers. The South African Associated Newspapers are probably the most integrated of the newspaper organizations. In the SAAN building on Main Street in Johannesburg where the Mail, Sunday Times, Sunday Express and Financial Mail are all published, some 371 blacks are included among the 1275 people employed in various departments of the four papers.

In apartheid South Africa, there is much news that only blacks can gather, such as that in the townships, but it is also true that many white news sources will not talk with a black reporter. The Mail has found it useful to send out a black and white reporter team to cover certain kinds of stories.

A particular source of irritation to black reporters concerns press cards which are essential to gain access to a fire, disaster, civil disturbance, or crime scene where police are present. Press cards are issued by the commissioner of police and go automatically to white reporters, but are often capriciously withheld from black reporters.

Black reporters resent the way their stories are handled and often rewritten by white subeditors, who frequently tone down or edit sharply the news blacks bring in. There is often some justification for doing this for under the harsh and complex laws restricting what the press

can report, especially in matters concerning police, prisons, defense, jails, uranium, and the vague area of "racial incitement," editors must be extremely careful of what they put into print.[14] Blacks feel that if there were more black subs, more of their versions of the news would get into the papers.

As a result of the Soweto riot coverage, the black journalist enjoys a new prestige among the black community as well as with his white colleagues. Yet black journalists almost unanimously feel that white journalists don't understand the depths of black anger and frustration. Author Alan Paton understood this when he said, "I am not writing for all the people of South Africa. I am writing for its white people. White people cannot write for black people anymore."[15]

Many black reporters are caught up emotionally in "the struggle" to end white rule and find it difficult to report objectively and play by the rules of professional journalism. Black journalist Pearl Luthuli said, "The black journalist can't be objective. We try to tell it like it is but the white editors won't print it." Another said, "We are black people first, journalists second. If it comes to a conflict between the struggle and the job, the struggle comes first."[16]

Black Separatism and W.A.S.A.

As urban Africans, black journalists have been strongly influenced by Steve Biko's black consciousness movement, which has revived black nationalism with emphasis on pride, self-reliance, and a commitment to restoring a black African heritage in South Africa. Also, a separatism characterizes black politics today, and whites, no matter

how sympathetic, are regarded as an indivisible part of the discriminatory system that blacks must ultimately transform. Blacks have been dependent on white liberals to voice their concerns because individual blacks were too vulnerable to repression. However, that is changing. "The breakout from this syndrome of black dependence came first from black students on their segregated campuses. In 1969, black students led by Biko organized themselves into the South African Students Organizations (SASO). Shortly thereafter they broke away from the predominantly white student group, NUSAS."[17] Today, that action is seen as the most important political event of the past decade.

Black journalists are following a course similar to that of black students. Although most blacks work alongside white colleagues, many are rejecting and even scorning help or cooperation with their liberal white sympathizers who are often puzzled or angered by this turn of events.

One flash point has been the friction between the South African Society of Journalists (SASJ) and the Writers Association of South Africa (WASA), which replaced the banned Union of Black Journalists. Until recently SASJ was an exclusively white group because it opted to be a labor union, which by law could have no black members, in order to bargain wages with the Newspaper Publishers Union, the legal organization of daily and periodical publishers. As a union, SASJ had agreed to black wage scales somewhat lower than that of whites.

This is an example of how apartheid cuts across the otherwise solidarity of workers against employers and puts labor on the same side as white employers. Under labor law, SASJ was barred from having blacks

in its organization and then did not represent their economic interests as well as black journalists desired. It's true also that some white journalists do not like to work with blacks, and one reason that black subeditors are so rare is that white printers and compositors in the past have refused to work with black subs. Such workplace frictions have contributed to separatist trends. As one WASA member said, "After work, white journalists go to their homes in the Northern suburbs and we go to Soweto. On election days, they go to the polls and we do not."[18]

In 1978, SASJ voted to drop its union role and to take in black members. However, the majority of blacks refused the offer and opted instead for WASA which has been taking an increasingly anti-white, anti-SASJ position.

This militant separatism was well illustrated by resolutions at a WASA congress at Durban in July 1978. WASA made headlines with an attack on Donald Woods calling him "irrelevant to the black struggle and to black journalism." WASA wants to publicly condemn him as an opportunist of the most unscrupulous kind and as a hypocrite, who as editor of the Daily Dispatch, did nothing to improve the position of black journalists on his paper. "We express our disgust at the shameless manner in which he is exploiting the name of the hero of the people, Steve Biko."[19]

Woods replied from Britain to the attack, but because he is a banned person in South Africa, the press could not report it. However, white colleagues did come to his defense, including Dispatch Editor Farr who said, "Journalists here are treated according to their merit.

I know of no writer in this country who campaigned harder and more eloquently for the cause of non-racialism than Woods."[20]

WASA also formally declared it would have nothing to do with SASJ and would refuse to join the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) in Brussels if SASJ was given membership. WASA claimed 150 of the over 200 black journalists as members while SASJ has about 30 blacks. Because of its separatism, WASA is viewed by many white journalists as racist and anti-white.

For its own part, WASA is quite specific on what it wants: 1) equal pay and full recognition for black journalists, 2) more and better training for blacks, 3) more voice in editorial policy ("whites don't know what blacks really want to read about," I was told.), and 4) black editors of the township editions.[21]

White editors, especially on the Rand Daily Mail which has done so much for blacks, are perplexed about how to respond. Voice Editor Ntouli said, "The Mail has a serious problem with black reporters who want to go their own way. They threaten not to work if certain grievances are not handled immediately." And Matt Franjola, AP correspondent in Johannesburg, sees this militancy affecting professional performance, "black journalists are becoming very militant and propagandistic. They don't believe there can be two sides to a story."[22]

There is a generation gap as well: younger journalists are more angry and alienated. Peter Magubane, who at 45 has stood up to police repression longer than anyone, is ridiculed by some younger colleagues because he belongs to SASJ and takes a professional approach to his work. "Doc" Sipho Bibitsha, 48, says, "They take us old journalists as softies,

as moderates. They say we have been under the system for so long that we don't see things as they are. It does hurt."[23]

For the black journalist under apartheid, it's a time of opportunities and frustrations. In any case, his own fate as a South African and as a journalist will be decided within the context of the much larger struggle of forces working out the future of South Africa itself. Most agree that whatever connotation is placed on the word, the future is black.

Footnotes

[1]Major population groups are 19 million blacks, 2.4 million racially mixed "coloreds," 765,000 Asians (mostly Indians) and 4.4 million whites of which three-fifths are Afrikaans-speaking Afrikaners and two-fifths English-speakers of British descent.

[2]The press generally, and especially several English language dailies, has been under growing threat of repression from the ruling Nationalist government. By focussing here on the black journalist, the author does not wish to underestimate the general peril to press freedom in South Africa. For recent discussions of that issue see: MORE, December 1977, pp. 12-31 (six articles on South African press); Benjamin Pogrund, "The South African Press," INDEX ON CENSORSHIP, Vol. 5, No. 6, Autumn 1976, pp. 10-16; and Andrew Silk, "Vorster Bullies the Press," NATION, May 21, 1977, pp. 618-621.

[3]Caryle Murphy, "S. Africa's Black Reporters Move Up," Washington Post, July 28, 1978, p. A15.

[4]Interview with author in Johannesburg, July 18, 1978.

[5]Murphy, op. cit.

[6]Interview with Vusi Radebe, a black stringer for Rand Daily Mail, July 16, 1978.

[7]Patrick Laurence, "Reporters Held After Race Riot Coverage," IPI Report, Vol. 25, No. 10, October 1976, pp. 1-3.

[8]Quoted in New York Times, Sunday, May 1, 1978, p. 48.

[9]In his recent book, Biko (New York: Paddington Press, 1978), Woods wrote, p. 270: "As to the claim that South Africa has a free press, let the assurance be recorded here by at least one South African newspaper editor that whatever tenuous claims in this regard might have been valid before October 19, 1977, the validity of such claims expired beyond on all doubt with the detention of Percy Qoboza, editor of The World, and with my own banning. Percy and I were punished and silenced without charge or trial, simply because of what our newspapers represented--the aspirations of black South Africans for a fair deal."

Following this repression of the press, 19 chief editors of the English-language newspapers issued a joint statement that if the Government's actions "are intended to intimidate other editors, we record that we have no intention of altering our way of conducting newspapers."

[10]Interview with Prof. Les Switzer, Journalism Department, Rhodes University, South Africa, July 8, 1978.

[11]Imvo is now owned by a subsidiary of Perskor, a pro-Government press group.

[12]Prof. C.A. Giffard, "Media Trends in South Africa," a paper delivered at a national conference, "The Road Ahead," Grahamstown, South Africa, July 7, 1978.

[13]Giffard, op. cit., p. 17.

[14]Kelsey W. Stuart in his authoritative The Newspaperman's Guide to the Law (2nd Edition, Durban: Butterworths, 1977) lists some 90 statutes and 300 cases that affect newspaper operations in South Africa.

[15]Quoted in the New York Times, June 24, 1976.

[16]Quoted in Murphy, op. cit. Similar views were expressed by several black journalists interviewed by author.

[17]Gwendolen Carter, "South Africa: Battleground of Rival Nationalisms," p. 126-7 in Carter, G. and P. O'Meara (eds.), Southern Africa in Crisis (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1977).

[18]Interview with Thami Mazwai, reporter on Post and WASA officer, July 27, 1978.

[19]"Writers Wade Into Woods," Rand Daily Mail, July 3, 1978, p. 1.

[20]"Woods Falsely Accused--Editor," Rand Daily Mail, July 4, 1978, p. 1.

[21]These views were expressed in talks with Zwelakhe Sisulu, WASA president, and Phil Mthimkhulu, WASA vice president, Johannesburg, July 12, 1978.

[22]Views expressed in talks with Ntouli and Franjola, July 20, 1978.

[23]Murphy, op. cit.